

Desi Infotainment for the Diaspora

By ASHISH KUMAR SEN

Surfing channels in his New Jersey apartment on a Sunday afternoon, Shashi Kant couldn't help but marvel at the burgeoning options for news and entertainment from South Asia. When he moved from Bangalore to the United States 20 years ago, a homesick Kant spent his days longing for familiar images. "There was just one channel that would screen news and entertainment from India, but the offering was brief," he reminisced. "If I overslept on a Sunday morning, I would miss it."

Now, he says, the number of South Asian television programs available is "simply mind-boggling." While a lot of these programs come from India, an increasing number are being produced in the United States.

Sreenath Sreenivasan, a journalism professor at Columbia University in New York City, says, "There are only a handful of actual Indian American networks. But there are at least 100 Indian American TV programs. There are also lots of Pakistani and Bangladeshi programs." These reach viewers through leased-time programming, an arrangement whereby channels lease airtime for community use. The programs often last only a couple of hours a day.

Zee TV tops the list among non-Hispanic ethnic television channels in terms of paying subscribers in the United States. The channel started its U.S. operations in July 1998. A year later, it launched Zee Gold, a 24/7 South Asian movies and music channel. The channel airs 44 movies every week, seven of them during the weekend, providing an "unadulterated glimpse of Bollywood."

In December, South Asia World Inc. launched South Asia World, a 24-hour English-language news and infotainment channel. The channel has operational arrangements with

Television Eighteen India Limited (TV18), a company founded by Raghav Bahl that also runs CNBC-TV18, a business news channel based in India. South Asia World offers subscribers a mix of live news from the Indian subcontinent and coverage of the South Asian community in the United States and Britain.

The channel, Bahl noted during the launch, was the "realization of a dream we've had for five years—to create a television forum for Indians the world over." The Indian American community is among the fastest growing in the United States, especially among the middle and upper class. "This channel is not only a celebration of the life success of these people, but will also act as a platform to highlight issues that impact their progress," Bahl said.

Indira Kannan, New York-based editor of South Asia World,



Studio set of the American Desi television network.



Vimal Verma, American Desi chairman and CEO.

notes a growing demand for programs on the latest happenings in South Asia, Bollywood and cricket, though not necessarily in that order. While channels like Zee TV, B4U and Sony Entertainment cater to the "entertainment needs" of the community, Kannan said there was a distinct lack of news and infotainment programming in the United States. South Asia World will cover not only various segments of this community but also the interface with fellow Americans.

More TV programs for people of South Asian heritage are being produced in America by journalists and entrepreneurs with roots in the subcontinent.

South Asia World is not alone in its endeavor. New York-based Vimal Verma parlayed his experience at American Express to start American Desi, which, he says, “is the only American-owned 24-hour, English-language television network for South Asians living in America.” The network, which is run from studios in New Jersey and New York, caters to “pre-teens, teenagers, Gen X and Y, the 40-plus crowd that has been in the United States for a few years and whether *desi* or not, all those who appreciated movies like *Bend It Like Beckham*....American Desi will provide the *desi* public with entertainment of the quality and sophistication they have become used to.”

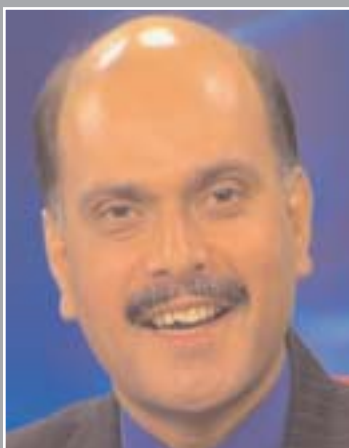
Some channels have been around for a while. One such is TV Asia, founded in 1993 by Amitabh Bachchan and acquired by NRI entrepreneur H.R. Shah four years later. “TV Asia was the

English-language station but has introduced programs in Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali and other regional languages.

Kannan at South Asia World feels, however, that outside India, English seems to be the common language for South Asians. South Asia World is exclusively available on the DISH Network in the United States and on Sky Channel 450 in Britain. The channel covers political and business news from the Indian subcontinent, including the latest news from the cricket pitch and Bollywood, profiles successful Indian Americans, features celebrities and debates issues that matter to the community. A “Frequently Asked Questions” program offers guidance and advice on investing and information on job and business opportunities in India. Its anchors include such well-known names as theater personality Sanjana Kapoor, dancer Mallika



Rohit Vyas, TV Asia news anchor, news director and vice president.



Raghav Bahl, founder of South Asia World and India's TV 18.



Gayatri Iyer anchors "The Diaspora" on South Asia World.

first major Indian-owned network,” recalls Rohit Vyas, a founder and vice president. “Our goal was to beam throughout North America so every single South Asian American could watch programs that were tailored to his needs.” Two generations of South Asians grew up watching TV Asia, says Vyas. “The second generation knows their roots are in India. What I attempt to do is to bring together their heritage and their life here.” TV Asia airs 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It started as a predominantly

Sarabhai, TV talk show host Karan Thapar and sportscaster Harsha Bhogle.

Another Indian channel on DISH is American Desi, which hopes to set new standards. “We are achieving many firsts,” says Vyas. “We will have the first televised music contest for a Hollywood film, and we will be bringing the game of cricket to the U.S. in a new way,” he says. It offers its viewers *desi*-themed daily morning newscasts, presents a multi-generational lifestyle

talk show for women, showcases international and American sports and covers Bollywood and Hollywood. The network will also exclusively cover ProCricket, the first professional cricket league in the United States, with minor variations in the rules of the game.

A number of other channels have been eyeing the U.S. market. Channel 7 in India recently announced its intention to tap the Indian community in the United States, Britain, Canada, the Middle East, South Africa and Australia.

ETV channel's ETV Bangla, Telugu and Gujarati are also set to air in the United States. The government-owned All India Radio and Doordarshan are also eyeing overseas Indians. K.S. Sarma, CEO of the Prasar Bharati Corporation, says his plan to "reach everyone" was born from a long-standing demand for Doordarshan and All India Radio programs from the Indian diaspora.

South Asia World's live coverage of the Indian budget was a big draw, as was the Republic Day parade footage. Many viewers wrote letters to the network describing their joy at being able to have an "emotional connection with India."

The proliferation of TV channels is in direct proportion to the success and the size of the South Asian community in the United States—estimated to reach 6 million by the end of the decade.

"In the end there will be only a few big players left," Vyas says. "This is just a temporary phenomenon because everyone seems to think there is a lucrative pie here...but it's a small pie. The market has been highly overrated by all the networks that want to spring up over here." South Asia World executives believe the market is a big enough base to work with as long as they keep costs down. Profitability, they feel, may depend on whether content and expenses can be shared. Media analysts say channels that tend to rely on programs from the subcontinent might be forced to rethink their strategy.

Growing up watching American TV, the community has come to expect a different standard from the emerging networks. "Desis want NBC- and ABC-quality shows," says Verma, referring to two of the oldest American TV networks. "How the heck do you give them that? You go hire NBC, ABC people....It is only a question of time before the team starts producing NBC- and ABC-quality shows that the people want."

Most agree that it's only the first-generation immigrants from South Asia who avidly watch these programs. Subsequent generations are simply not interested. The younger generations, born and raised in America, cannot relate to shows set in an Indian context.

Verma says immigrants are more interested in knowing how events in America will affect them. "It is a perfect time for this important segment of the population to have its own television network that will stand as a virtual meeting place in which to keep touch with *desi* culture and share it with others," he says. "As *desi* people, we are well aware of our roots, but we are also aware that our lives are intertwined with the American culture that we have adopted," he adds. □

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By ANJUM NAIM

The desire among American Muslims for non-radical, general TV news and lifestyle programs just for them is so great that thousands were willing to buy subscriptions before the new Bridges TV was even launched.

Why on earth would 10,000 people pay an advance monthly subscription for a non-existent TV channel? Yet, just months after Bridges TV was launched, tens of thousands of viewers signed up for the first American Muslim channel.

Its founder and CEO, Muzzammil Hassan, says, "Every day on television we are barraged by stories of a 'Muslim extremist, militant, terrorist, or insurgent.' But the stories that are missing are the countless stories of Muslim tolerance, progress, diversity, service."

Although foreign language channels are available to Muslim immigrants interested in keeping in touch with the countries they came from, the content was not relevant to the new generation that has grown up in the United States and for people trying to under-

Aasiya Zubair (left) thought up the idea of an American Muslim lifestyle network and urged her husband Muzzammil Hassan (right) to develop a business plan. The result, a variety of programs relevant to a new generation.



Photographs courtesy Bridges TV

Bridging the Media Gap

stand Muslims from their ideological perspective. The planners of Bridges TV instead focused on highlighting the lifestyle and culture of English-speaking American Muslims.

Hassan, 41, parlayed his experience as a banker with M&T Bank in Buffalo, New York, to generate funding from more than 50 private investors, 10,000 paying members and Ropart Asset Management, a Connecticut-based equity fund.

"We cannot think of another television network that garnered paying members before it was available," says Hassan. "This outpouring of support from American Muslims shows not only that there is an audience for Bridges TV, but also that American Muslims are deeply committed to changing perceptions of Muslims around the world."

The channel was initially available in Detroit, Michigan, and Toledo, Ohio, and "everybody put in a good word" about it, says Hassan. Former world boxing heavy-

weight champion Mohammad Ali, who was one of the early subscribers, said at the inauguration, "This TV channel has provided Americans with an opportunity to observe Muslims closely and, thereby, understand their psyche. In other words, this endeavor may be defined as an easy effort to develop intimacy with your neighbor without knocking on his doors."

Hassan and his team tried to make the channel's content all-embracing, including entertainment and everyday issues and keeping it clear of religious or political extremism. Soon the channel successfully hit New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Washington. By the end of this year, the broadcasts are expected to be available in Canada and next year in Britain.

The round-the-clock English programs—cooking, travel, history, women- and youth-related issues—are all streamlined on the lines of successful contemporary channels, with the help of media experts such as Executive Producer Tayie

Rehem, a former CBC executive in Toronto; Asad Mohammed, a former NBC producer who hosts Bridges News; Jameela Fraser, who was associated with CBS in North Carolina; John Sehu, an eminent news editor; producer Katie Ward and editor Brittany Cain.

Hollywood producer Sheldon Altfield, a four-time Emmy winner, told the audience at the inaugural function that he was impressed by the quality of programming on Bridges TV. "It is simply spectacular."

Hassan told SPAN he has managed to generate enough capital "for the next three years" from several private equity firms and accumulated monthly subscriptions from thousands of viewers.

"The cooperation this channel received from American Muslims is, on the one hand, an explicit manifestation of the people's aspiration," he says. "It is on the other hand, a clear indication of the utmost concern to bring positive change in the image of the Muslims in general." □

